

Waiting Hopefully: The Virtue of Patience

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Last week, I was on the way home from work and swung by the Costco off Coit and Churchill so I could get gas for my car. I pulled into the third of three pumps in one particular aisle, behind two other cars that were in front of me at the first two pumps. While I was filling up my tank, the car at the middle pump finished and left. The front car and I both finished at about the same time and the driver and I got back in our cars to leave. No sooner had I gotten in my car and turned it on to prepare to pull out, than I looked up and saw that a car had just driven past me and, given that the front car had not yet pulled out either, began to back in to the middle pump right between the two of us that were still there. So I had to sit there and wait while he parallel parked in between the two of us (and almost hit my car in the process!) before I could then back up a few feet, swing out past this car that couldn't wait 5 seconds for the front car and me to pull out, and finally exit the gas station. I could not believe how impatient this person was—it took him longer (and was more complicated, at that) to navigate to get in between

the two of us than had he waited the 5 seconds for the front car and I to pull out, meanwhile delaying me in the process for no particular reason.

While on the one hand I say I couldn't believe what this driver did, on the other hand, I'm not surprised at all. Jen and I have been discussing recently how many times a week we see someone blatantly run a red light. It's not that we've never seen this happen before in our many years of driving, but we were both commenting how much more frequently we see it now than in years past. People in our day and age increasingly seem to lack the ability to be patient, whether it's waiting for a gas pump to open up, waiting for a traffic light to turn green, or when listening to someone who is frustrating us or with whom we disagree. When we are impatient, one thing we convey to others is that our time is more valuable than theirs. We can't be troubled to wait a few seconds for them to move their car, or two minutes for the traffic light to turn back to green again, or to listen actively and respectfully when we think we know better than the person talking to us, either regarding the issue at hand, or maybe even in general. It seems like a somewhat selfish approach to living, but if we're going to consider looking at this differently going forward, we need to understand some of the factors that may lead to an increase in impatience and what might help us reframe our approach. Impatience can certainly be a function of anxiety: I'm worried I'm going to be late to

something, or I'm worried that I'm going to have to listen to something I don't want to hear or even strenuously disagree with. When we run a red light, though, we're rejecting the system that our society has set up to keep everyone safe while driving, and we're even rejecting that system when it comes to the safety of the people in our own car. And when we snap at someone who's talking to us, we're rejecting the system of civil discourse that conditions us to speak respectfully to one another even when we disagree. Yet when we feel a time pressure, and/or when we feel societal norms of respectful discourse breaking down, we may opt to respond defiantly and reject the applicability to us of those social norms at all. Other people are running red lights and yelling at one another, and at me—so why do I need to guard those norms, when I can just look out for myself!

Not surprisingly, our Jewish tradition comes down strongly on the side of patience as an important virtue that needs to be cultivated, after we are exposed early on in the Torah to examples of impatience gone awry. Consider the case of Esau in Genesis 25, who had been out hunting for the day and returned home tired and hungry to find that his twin brother Jacob was cooking a lentil stew. Esau says to Jacob, “*hal'iteni na min ha-adom ha-adom ha-zeh, ki ayef anochi*”, “Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished” (25:30). In return for the food, Jacob asks Esau to sell him his birthright, and Esau's response? “*Hiney anochi holekh lamut, v'lamah zeh li b'chorah*”, “I am at the point of death, so of

what use is my birthright to me?” (25:32) Esau exaggerates his condition here, indicating that the only thing that matters to him right now is physical sustenance. Jacob insists that Esau swear on their agreement, and Esau readily complies. Jacob then gives Esau bread and lentil stew, and in describing Esau’s response, the biblical text is telling: “*va’yochal va-yesht va-yakom va-yelach va-yivez Esav et ha-b’chorah*”, “he ate, drank, rose and went away and, in so doing, spurned the birthright” (25:34). Five consecutive verbs in the text, uninterrupted by any other parts of speech. Esau acted impulsively and in haste and cost himself the birthright which was of significant value back in Ancient Near Eastern Times. He was exhausted, hungry and anxious, and so instead of making himself his own meal, or negotiating a better deal with the opportunistic Jacob, he made a decision that may not have seemed disastrous in the moment but ultimately changed the entire course of his life and future.

Esau’s cautionary tale of impatience stands in sharp contrast to the example of patience demonstrated by our ancestor Joseph the Dreamer; well, at least the older, more mature version of Joseph, after he’s gone through several significant challenges in his life and spent 20 years living in Egypt. When he encounters his brothers years after they threatened to kill him, dumped him in a pit and then sold him into slavery, he does not reveal himself immediately. He waits three days

before interacting with them, and then concocts a methodical plan to test their character, waiting for them to go back and forth to Canaan in trips that would have taken days or likely weeks, instead of letting them know right off the bat who he actually was. As my colleague Rabbi Abigail Treu commented in a D'var Torah she wrote a number of years ago for the Jewish Theological Seminary, Bible scholar James Kugel “suggests that the Joseph ‘character’ is an archetype of the ancient Near Eastern sage, ... the only one of Israel’s ancestors who is called ‘wise’, *chacham*, ... the same word as the noun ‘sage’ in Hebrew”, and throughout his whole story of ups and downs... Joseph reveals that cardinal sagely virtue of patience (How to Read the Bible, p.183)”.

Other later Biblical texts also echo the significance of this virtue. For example, we’re taught in Proverbs 15:18 “*Ish cheyma y’gareh madon, v’erekh apayim yashkit riv, A hot-tempered man provokes a quarrel; a patient man calms strife*”, and in Ecclesiastes 7:8-9 “*Tov acharit davar me-reyshito, tov erekh ruach mi-g’vah ruach, The end of a matter is better than the beginning of it; better a patient spirit than a haughty spirit. Al t’vahal b’ruchacha li’chos, ki cha’as b’cheyk k’silim yanuach, Don’t let your spirit be quickly vexed, for vexation abides in the breast of fools*”. In modern times, the *mussar* movement of the 19th century addresses the trait of *savlanut*, patience, as one of the key traits we should nurture for our spiritual, ethical and emotional development.

Patience is not just about slowing things down and biding our time, it is about restraining our impulse to get frustrated when things are not moving at the pace we'd like or are not going our way. Joseph's story is more powerful because he is struggling with his emotions throughout the process. Multiple times he excuses himself from his as yet unknowing brothers to cry alone. But despite his emotional impulses, he waits for the right set of circumstances and the right moment to reveal himself to them when he sees the best possible opportunity to redeem their relationship.

So how does Joseph do it? Demonstrate patience when confronted with an opportunity to get back at his brothers after all the hurt they caused him? During the climactic moment of his big reveal to his brothers, the biblical text actually shines a light on what helped him through. *“Ani Yosef achichem, I am your brother Joseph, asher m'charterm oti mitzrayma, he whom you sold into Egypt! V'atah al te'atzvu v'al yichar b'eyneichem, Now, do not be distressed or reproach yourselves, ki m'chartem oti heyna, because you sold me here; ki l'michya sh'lachani Elohim lifneichem, it was to save life that God sent me ahead of you”* (Genesis 45:5). Rabbi Treu cites the biblical scholar Kugel once again in analyzing this critical comment from Joseph: *“An Ancient Near Eastern sage was patient precisely because he believed that everything in this world happens according to the Divine plan; things will always, therefore, turn out for the best, no*

matter how bad they may appear now” (Kugel, 183). Said another way, faith is the foundation of Joseph’s patience. If we want to frame it traditionally and theologically, we could say that this means God is good and God has a good plan that is unfolding even when it’s not readily apparent to us.

A more universal way of putting it might be that, in order to be patient, we need to maintain a solid faith that everything will work out fine in the end. We need to be able to believe that the system will work out. We wait for the two cars at the gas station to move because they waited for the previous two cars to move and because it keeps the flow smooth for entering and exiting cars. If that notoriously pesky little traffic light at Preston and Over Downs in front of St. Mark’s School turns red and I’m in a hurry approaching it while heading down to shul, sure, it’s annoying, because I successfully breezed through the green light at Preston Royal only to have to stop for 30 seconds at this light. But we stop at the red light because traffic lights prevent chaos and accidents and others need to take their turn to go through the intersection and our stopping keeps them, and us, safe. And when we hold our tongue and refrain from snapping at someone, a family member, a friend, a colleague, or someone we encounter in our daily activities, who is telling us something we aren’t interested in hearing for one reason or another—i.e. we don’t want the unsolicited advice, we think we know better, we have different political opinions, or we’re just plain in a hurry—we reaffirm that we

believe in societal norms like patient and respectful disagreement and demonstrate that not every interaction requires an emotional or impatient reaction. It's ok, we can simply agree to disagree on what the right course of action is or what the "right" point of view is!

So **patience**—the ability to **wait** out something that is frustrating to us or our short-term or long-term goals and aspirations—is partly about having faith that things will work out ok. But the beautiful twist in the Hebrew language is that the Hebrew root “*k-v-h*” -- “*kaveh*” or “*kivah*” -- actually means both “**wait**” and “**hope**”. For example, the name of Israel’s national anthem, “*HaTikvah*”, refers to the 2000 years of hope that got us through waiting in exile for a return to Zion. Similarly, in the middle of our patriarch Jacob’s final testimony to his children while on his deathbed, he utters the phrase “*li-y’shuatkha kiviti Adonai*” (Genesis 49:18), “I wait/hope for your deliverance, O Lord!”. And in Psalm 27, which we have been reciting morning and night throughout the month of Elul and during our High Holy Day season, we conclude the Psalm with the phrase “*kaveh el Adonai, chazak v’ya’amez libekha, v’kaveh el Adonai*”, “place your hope in Adonai, be strong, take courage, and place your hope in Adonai”.

When we peel back the layers of what convinces us to be **patient**, we find **hope** at the center of it all. We wait because we find a way to trust in a positive outcome, we train ourselves as our ancestor Joseph the Dreamer ultimately did—moving from

an impulsive and braggadocious young man to a *chacham*, a wise man as an adult—to hope that good may yet come out of a situation that frustrates us. When our emotions overwhelm us and tempt us to reject the system of norms around us, we would be wise to remember that our short-term perceived goals like getting somewhere quickly, our “moments”, or beliefs, should not always take precedence over others’ goals, moments or beliefs. Like Joseph, we can dig deep and find a way to wait just a little longer, to be patient, and to deal calmly and respectfully with those around us. Aren’t our dreams of a healthier society worth an extra minute or two of our time?

L’Shana Tova, and *tzom kal*, have an easy and meaningful fast, and may our patience through our long day of fasting and prayer today inspire us in this year ahead to resist impulsivity when possible and embrace a greater sense of calm and restraint in our actions. AMEN.